

# Videoconferencing with the French-Speaking World: A User's Guide

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**Abstract:** *This article focuses on a videoconferencing project that was conducted between an American and a French university. It describes the way that the exchange was set up and run, the types of equipment and materials that were used, the students' activities and assignments, the methods used for evaluating students' work, and the relationship of the project to the goals of the course and the department's curriculum. In addition, practical suggestions for those considering the use of videoconferencing are included. The pedagogical benefits of integrating videoconferencing into the communicative foreign language classroom are outlined; videoconferencing provides students with opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills with native speakers and to gain cultural insights that are possible only in an interactive setting.*

## Introduction

Interactive technology as an integral part of modern foreign language teaching has enabled students to achieve something that was hardly possible before: meaningful contact with native speakers of the target language. In the past, transatlantic pen pals might have written to each other and waited weeks for a response; today, students can dash off an e-mail message to a peer at a foreign university and receive an answer almost immediately. In addition, students can enter chat rooms and instantly converse with native speakers. However, the newest, most exciting medium for interacting with native speakers is videoconferencing. Foreign language instructors are discovering that the distance learning facilities and computing options already in place on many college campuses can easily be used to create live, interactive conversations between American and non-American students.

This article describes a project that employed a particular type of videoconference: a point-to-point meeting of two university classes, one in France and one in the United States.<sup>1</sup> By means of this technology, students were able to see and speak to their French classmates with no lag time between their utterances. In the American university, the conferences were conducted by means of a two-way audio and video-equipped classroom that contained a 42" screen and a 35" monitor at the front of the room and two 35" monitors at the back of the room, two interactive video cameras, a data/video projector, and a VHS player and recorder. The image before the students was large, and sophisticated tracking devices enabled the camera to zoom in on whichever student was speaking, creating a dynamic motion picture. The use of the two-way audio and video cameras and screens allowed conversation to be spontaneous and natural.

The connection was made using ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) phone lines; both American and French institutions had this service. The cost of a videoconferencing session is approximately three times that of a standard international telephone call. The cost for subscribing to the ISDN phone line service is about \$2400/year.<sup>2</sup>

This article outlines the many benefits of integrating videoconferencing into the foreign language classroom, emphasizing how it contributes to meeting the goals of communicatively based

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curricula. Suggestions for avoiding some common problems and potential mistakes are made, and guidelines for incorporating helpful pedagogic strategies and running sessions more smoothly are provided. The article is organized as follows: First, prior studies that are relevant to this project are discussed. Then, the content of some of the sessions that took place during this study is presented. The next section lists some ways to establish a successful videoconferencing program. The conclusion addresses curricular goals, the role of the instructor during the sessions, and the evaluation of students' participation in the project.

### **Rationale and Pedagogical Considerations**

Videoconferencing is a medium that can be used for teaching both culture and language. Kinginger et al. (1999) provide an excellent model of a course developed around a cultural theme that employs videoconferencing. In an earlier study, Gallego (1992, p. 51) describes a project using a photophone ("a small telephone-like device which allows the interlocutors to see each other's still picture on a small screen while talking") and its positive effect on student motivation, language learning, and cultural awareness. Articles by Eddy (1989), Grandjean-Levy (1997), and Kunert et al. (1997) also document the role that interactive projects can play in improving student motivation and language development.

Recent research has called for the integration of more authentic texts of both the written and oral varieties into the communicative classroom.<sup>3</sup> These studies argue that, especially in beginning and intermediate language classes, students often receive input that is not truly representative of how native speakers express themselves.<sup>4</sup> In addition, students are often confused by textbooks that present a blend of both spoken and written forms without making a clear differentiation between the two; conversations that are printed in textbooks often do not represent language as it is truly spoken.<sup>5</sup> One of the goals of teaching a foreign language should be helping students discover the many lexical, syntactic, and phonological traits that are found exclusively in the spoken language. Actually hearing foreign speakers use these structures provides students with naturally occurring models of the spoken language, which they can then analyze using the video made during conferencing sessions.

Most modern textbooks contain numerous communicative activities in which students imagine themselves to be in various situations and then role-play using the target language to accomplish certain goals (for example, making a hotel reservation, ordering food in a restaurant, or even discussing aspects of one's life). Unfortunately, there is a flaw in the design of such activities. Instead of communicating with native speakers as in real-life situations, these language learners converse with others with similar lan-

guage skills. This provides an artificial and unrealistic context, since it is highly unlikely that students will find themselves in a foreign country speaking the target language to someone whose native language proficiency is the same as their own. Granted, this type of activity allows students to practice expressing themselves, and it can give them the opportunity to conduct pseudo-conversations. The input that they receive from their partners, however, is not always useful and can even be harmful, for often students hear more errors than actual examples of native-like speech.

In the ordinary classroom, it is practically impossible to provide all the students with a native speaker with whom they can practice speaking. Instructors attempt to give their students as much meaningful input as possible through the use of authentic materials, but they know that students are usually deprived of the best way to learn a foreign language: making oneself understood to a native speaker and attempting to decipher that speaker's response. Videoconferencing, however, gives American students the opportunity to participate in real, not contrived, conversations with native French speakers.

### **Subject Matter and Strategies for Successful Videoconferencing**

Before setting up a videoconferencing program, it is important to make certain that both participating instructors, American and foreign, have compatible goals and that their classes are well-suited to work with each other. When conducting videoconferencing sessions in first-year foreign language courses, one should be realistic about students' level of language mastery. The most difficult part of a session is oral comprehension, since the sound quality of the transmission may not always be perfect. As the sessions in this study were conducted, the technicians became more adept at blocking out interference and providing better sound quality. In earlier sessions, however, due to minor technical glitches, it was sometimes difficult to understand what the French students were saying.

In less advanced classes, it is preferable to set up an exchange with American students who have approximately the same level of language skills in the target language as their counterparts have in English. If language learners have similar levels of proficiency, they have more empathy for one another. They tend to be more patient, and they make an effort to speak more slowly, to use circumlocution, and to stick to less complicated vocabulary and grammatical structures.

There are two possible ways to incorporate both languages (in this case, French and English) into the sessions, depending on the instructors' goals. If the intention is to work on students' productive rather than receptive skills, or if the focus is more on culture than on language prac-

tice, it is sometimes a good idea to have the American students speak French and the French students speak English. Although this may seem like a pedagogically questionable method, it often turns out to be the best solution if students have a low level of comprehension. It is true that this method does not lend itself to students' receiving much practice in hearing and understanding the target language as spoken by a native speaker, but it does allow them to ask their questions in the target language and be understood, which can be a rewarding experience for beginners.

### **Case Study: Project with a French Sociology Class**

In this project, an American third-year French Composition and Stylistics class participated in two hour-long videoconferencing sessions with a French sociology class. For the French students, the benefit of the interactions was entirely cultural; videoconferencing offered them an opportunity to learn American perspectives about current sociological issues. For the American students, there was the added element of discussing complicated topics in French with native speakers, an extremely challenging and ultimately rewarding experience. These conversations also enabled the American students to work on the receptive goal of the French language curriculum: to understand French native speakers.

The subject matter for the first session was an article that had recently appeared in *Le Monde*, which summarized a recent survey: 61% of the French respondents interviewed agreed that there were too many foreigners living in France.<sup>6</sup> Both groups of students were assigned to read the article carefully for the session. In addition, all American students were required to prepare five questions that they would ask the French students during the conference. The assignment tied into their recent work on journalistic texts and question formation. They were told to try to avoid questions of the yes/no variety unless they had strong follow-up questions.

Before the session, the instructor read and graded the students' questions on their grammar and content and then returned the questions with the grammatical mistakes corrected. The students were more comfortable asking questions that had already been read by their instructor, since they knew that the French students would understand them. During the class period before the session, the American students discussed the article, making sure that they had understood its content and cultural allusions. They identified key political figures, such as Lionel Jospin, Jacques Chirac, and Jean-Marie LePen, and they studied French unemployment and immigration statistics. In addition, the students practiced challenging and new vocabulary items from the text so that they would use these

expressions correctly during the session. The students appeared to be more motivated than usual to understand each topic, since they knew that they would have difficulty during the videoconference if they did not have the tools and background for effective communication.

During the videoconferencing session, the French and American students participated in a fascinating discussion about racism and xenophobia. The students were surprised at the diversity represented by the other group: in Paris, the class included a young man from Senegal, an Asian woman, an Italian, and a Brazilian. In the American class, there were several Haitians, a woman from Trinidad/Tobago, a Parisian exchange student originally from the Ivory Coast, a native speaker of Portuguese, a native speaker of Italian, and several native speakers of Spanish.

The good will between the two classes was striking. Although the topic of racism and xenophobia had the potential to be explosive, everyone was sensitive to this fact and listened to each other with respect. The French students did more of the talking, probably because the American students felt more comfortable asking the questions that they had prepared beforehand rather than speaking spontaneously. As the session progressed, however, some Americans took more risks; in addition to asking their prepared questions, they made comments and asked new questions. For others, it was more of a listening comprehension activity than a true discussion. The Haitian-American students and a few of the other more proficient speakers kept the conversation going, though, and they were able to offer insights that the French class found intriguing.

French students' beliefs about the plight of African-Americans in the United States were most interesting. For example, the American students were stunned to learn that the French students believed that the Ku Klux Klan was a powerful group whose presence was felt uniformly throughout the United States. At the same time, the American students discovered that they had not known certain facts about their own culture. For example, one American student wrote on his post-videoconference evaluation that he "was ignorant of some issues like the KKK and the 4th Reich that was being reborn in the Middle States" [sic]. Hearing the French students' questions and comments gave the American students insights into how foreigners perceive the United States.

The French students were shocked to learn that the African-American students didn't feel that racism was a terrible problem here. They were especially surprised when a black exchange student from Paris told them that she felt more comfortable in the United States than in France. This statement obviously contradicted what the French students had gathered from the media about racism

in the United States. Shortly after the conference, though, it became evident that the American black students might have given the French students a somewhat warped view of the African-American experience. Many of these black students were Haitian immigrants and did not consider themselves to be African-Americans.<sup>7</sup> In addition, because the exchange student from Paris was attending an American university that was extraordinarily diverse, with a large number of francophone and black students, she had developed a different perspective about living in the United States than she might have had if she were living in another environment. It is important for instructors and students to realize that videoconferencing sessions have the potential to create inaccurate assumptions and generalizations, and that the discussions may incorrectly influence the students' perceptions of the foreign culture.

In a second session, which took place about a month later, the students talked about immigration and the plight of Haitian immigrants in both the United States and France. The situation of other immigrants in the United States was also discussed, as well as the differences among the various groups. The custody case of Elian Gonzales was in the headlines during this period, and the French students were interested in hearing the American students' opinions about it. Even though the subject matter was an American current event, the American students expressed themselves in French and worked on their language skills. For this session, students were concentrating on mastering the vocabulary associated with immigration, including geographical prepositions. The situation in which the students found themselves, that of cultural informants, was typical of what American students studying in France might experience. Being asked to clarify certain aspects of American culture and politics was an excellent exercise that related to two curricular goals of the department: mastering difficult vocabulary expressions that deal with current events and developing critical thinking skills.

During the second session, the American students acquired a better sense of the way the United States is viewed from the outside, a difficult realization for students who have not actually left the country and looked at it from another perspective. It is interesting that in the first session, the American students seemed defensive about their country and wanted to present it in the best possible light. For example, they claimed at first that racism was not any worse in the United States than elsewhere. By the second session, they became more honest about the actual state of affairs. The Haitian immigrant students spoke of the problems they encountered when driving through white neighborhoods or dating individuals of another race. They explained that although their college campus provided them with a secure and tolerant environment, American culture in general was far from ideal. Because mutual

respect and trust had developed over the course of the sessions, the Americans seemed to be more willing to discuss their country's flaws with the French students.

### Tips for Avoiding Potential Obstacles

There are several practical as well as theoretical matters that foreign language instructors should consider before initiating videoconferencing sessions:

1. Consult a calendar carefully when planning the sessions. French and American vacations do not take place at the same time. Do not forget to check when the switch to Daylight Savings Time occurs in both countries; in France, it usually takes place earlier.
2. Perform an equipment test with the French university's technician at least a week before the first session. If the American university's technician is not French-speaking, it is important to have an interpreter to facilitate communication or clear up any problems. It is often necessary to try calling back at a different phone number, or to change settings in order to achieve the best connection. It is essential to have a technician present during the actual videoconferencing exchange, because the connection needs to be monitored, and sometimes adjusted, during the session. Even with adequate training, language instructors would find it too difficult to trouble-shoot and run the equipment while keeping the class discussion progressing smoothly.
3. Limit beginning and intermediate class sessions to 20 or 30 minutes. More advanced classes can easily fill an hour (at the end of many sessions, the students were disappointed to end their discussion), but less sophisticated conversations may begin to drag after about a half hour.
4. Be sure to find colleagues abroad who are as committed to the project as you are. Without excellent communication between the two instructors, it is impossible to schedule successful sessions. If a foreign colleague does not respond to e-mail messages in a timely manner, it is likely that it will be extremely difficult to coordinate the project, as enthusiastic as he or she might sound.
5. Do not underestimate the importance of adequate planning: The more work that the students do before the conference, the more smoothly the session will go. The American students in this study were sometimes resentful when the French students had not prepared as carefully as they had for the discussions, so it is important to aim for adequate preparation on both sides. It can also be difficult if student participation from either country is voluntary rather than required,

because in this case, students may put less effort into getting ready for the session. At the same time, students who attend the sessions voluntarily are sometimes extremely motivated and add a great deal to the discussions.

6. In addition to videoconferencing, some instructors try to further the contact between their classes by setting up e-mail exchanges between the American and foreign students and having them participate in projects together. This sounds like an excellent idea, but it may be difficult to coordinate such efforts. In general, many foreign students do not have as much access to computers and multimedia resources as do American students. This situation will most likely change in the coming years, but as it stands now, it is not fair to make the American students accountable for projects that rely on e-mail responses from foreign students. Thus, e-mail exchanges should be optional.
7. Whenever possible, use the video made during the conference as a follow-up tool in class, either to clarify points that may have been missed or as an object of linguistic inquiry.<sup>8</sup> Blyth (1999, p. 205) explains that students can learn a great deal about how language works through studying the utterances of native speakers: "The goal is to change the role of the student into that of a language researcher who works to discover patterns and induce rules from authentic data." The excerpts that students extract from the videoconferences are especially interesting to them, since what is being said was directed at them.

## Conclusion

When designing videoconferencing activities, it is important to take into consideration the curricular goals of the particular course as well as those of the department in general. In addition, the issue of evaluation and student accountability should be addressed. As this article has discussed, the class that participated in this project studied the grammar of spoken French, the formation of interrogative constructions, the use of geographic prepositions, and journalistic style. In addition, the students discussed topics and learned vocabulary associated with immigration and racism, themes that had been visited throughout the semester; hence the videoconferencing sessions were relevant to the subject matter of the course. Students were evaluated on their preparation for the sessions, for example, the quality of the questions that they had prepared and their mastery of the readings under discussion. On exams, they were required to summarize and comment upon the outcomes of the videoconferences, and they used the videos that were created during the sessions as corpora in their discovery of the structures of the spoken language.

To improve the quality of future videoconferences,

two additional issues should be addressed: clearly defining the role of the instructor, and forming strategies for motivating the less-proficient or the less-extroverted students to participate more.

It is unclear what the role of the instructor during the exchange should be. Eddy (1989) asserts that "the teacher should keep a low profile during the actual exchange in order for the students to take full responsibility for the interaction" (pp. 215–16). For her, ideally, students should run the entire session, with the instructors acting more as observers. However, depending on the class, instructors must sometimes draw certain students into the discussion to keep them involved and to keep the conversation flowing. It is also sometimes a good idea for the instructor to summarize what has been said or to ask students to clarify something that might be unclear to the foreign students. More research needs to be done on the extent to which the instructors should participate in videoconferencing sessions.

During the sessions mentioned in this study, the American students tended to look to the instructor for confirmation that they were asking relevant questions or to make sure that the questions that they had just asked were clear. The instructor usually circulated about the room during the exchanges, encouraging the more reticent students to speak. At times, she repeated important things that the French students had said that the American students might not have understood. Similarly, the French instructor often repeated the American students' questions in order to give the French students a moment to think about their responses. This appeared to be a useful technique. On the other hand, perhaps the American students would have taken more control of the situation had they known that their instructor would not bail them out. Depending on the make-up of the class, it might be interesting to consider putting a student or a panel of students in charge of leading the discussion.

Another issue concerns helping less-proficient students overcome their shyness or insecurity about their language skills. American students with lower oral proficiency were somewhat intimidated by the interaction with the French sociology class. One student wrote: "Maybe if the topic that was discussed was equally as foreign to each class, I would have felt more at ease and more willing to add my input." Having all students prepare questions before the session is one way to encourage everyone to participate. As in any language class, however, there are some students who tend to dominate the conversation and others who sit quietly and listen. It would be ideal if all students could have an equal amount of time to speak, but this is an unrealistic expectation. One way of solving this problem would be to have students prepare oral presentations in which they are all obligated to participate. On the

other hand, forcing students to speak is not always beneficial, since the objective is to make them feel comfortable conversing in a foreign language. In addition, there is still a great deal to be learned just from listening to the discussions.

As more universities acquire the hardware and software that will allow students to use personal computers to videoconference with individual foreign students, the problem of uneven participation will be solved. For example, the *CUseeMe* software shows great promise for the foreign language classroom. According to the company's webpage ([www.cuseeme.com](http://www.cuseeme.com)), this software allows "real-time" interaction using the internet. Unfortunately, it will take some time before this technology is readily accessible to students throughout the world.

While we wait for interactive video and audio internet-based technology to become commonplace, the type of videoconferencing described in this article can be extremely beneficial. Videoconferencing helps to improve students' oral and receptive language skills, and it allows them to focus on certain grammatical structures and lexical items. It also provides students with insights not only into the target culture but into their own as well. In addition, videoconferencing increases students' motivation and interest, for it gives them authentic models of the ways that native speakers express themselves in spontaneous, naturally occurring discourse. Yet hearing native speakers speak is not sufficient. In order to learn to speak a foreign language well, students must interact with native speakers. The communicative classroom of the 21st century promises to provide what has been missing for as long as foreign languages have been taught: the ability to immerse students in foreign cultures and linguistic settings without them having to leave home.

## Notes

1. This type of videoconferencing differs from other types that are conducted using personal computers, such as the *CUseeMe* video collaboration software, which is described at the end of this article. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for bringing this type of videoconferencing to my attention.
2. I would like to thank David Fogg from Montclair State University for providing me with the technical information presented in this section.
3. See articles by Blyth (1999) and Katz (2000).
4. See Lee and VanPatten (1995) on the importance of meaningful input, Doughty and Williams (1998) and Spada (1997) on the Focus on Form framework and its application into foreign language teaching, and Valdman (2000) on the need to give students of all levels exposure to the various dialects, sociolects, and registers that exist in French.

5. See Herschensohn (1988).
6. See Zappi 2000.
7. See Katz (1997) for an ethnographic study of the sense of linguistic identity of Haitian students.
8. See Gallego (1992) for a discussion of this point.

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